

The Victorians and the Visual Imagination

Kate Flint



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The visible and the unseen

In 1849, Henry Mayhew set out to inquire into the conditions of the labouring population of London. As part of his investigation of specialist trades, he visited a dolls'-eye maker. This manufacturer told Mayhew about those factors which determined whether trade was slack or busy, and then revealed:

'I also make human eyes. These are two cases; in the one I have black and hazel, and in the other blue and grey.' [Here the man took the lids off a couple of boxes, about as big as binnacles, that stood on the table: they each contained 190 different eyes, and so like nature, that the effect produced upon a person unaccustomed to the sight was most peculiar, and far from pleasant. The whole of the 380 optics all seemed to be staring directly at the spectator, and occasioned a feeling somewhat similar to the bewilderment one experiences on suddenly becoming an object of general notice; as if the eyes, indeed, of a whole lecture-room were crammed into a few square inches, and all turned full upon you. The eyes of the whole world, as we say, literally appeared to be fixed upon one, and it was almost impossible at first to look at them without instinctively averting the head. The hundred eyes of Argus were positively insignificant in comparison to the 380 belonging to the human eye-maker.]¹

This book is about eyes, and about sight. The Victorians were fascinated with the act of seeing, with the question of the reliability – or otherwise – of the human eye, and with the problems of interpreting what they saw. These problems extended from the observation



of the natural world and the urban environment, to the more specialist interpretation demanded by actual works of art. In each case, the act of seeing was something performed by individuals, each with their particular subjectivities, and their own ocular physiology. Simultaneously, what was seen was necessarily selected, stressed, described and filtered through many cultural conventions. The interplay between these differing factors was increasingly recognised and explored as the century went on. Victorian commentators on the visual, however, were concerned with matters which went beyond the dialogue of subjectivity and the social. For the topic becomes yet more complicated and controversial when one recognises the tension that existed between the different valuations given to outward and inward seeing; to observation, on the one hand, and the life of the imagination on the other. Seeing in the mind's eye was linked to scrutinising the world around one, but it was not an identical process. The slipperiness of the borderline between the visible and the invisible, and the questions which it throws up about subjectivity, perception and point of view, lie at the heart of this study.

Mayhew's uncomfortable experience can be read as a near-hallucinatory realisation on his part of the power of the specular within mid-Victorian society. This society was characterised not just by the accelerated expansion of diverse opportunities for differing sorts of spectatorship, but by a growing concern with the very practice of looking, and with the problematisation of that crucial instrument, the human eye. Mayhew's own contributions to the *Morning Chronicle*, brought together in volume form as *London Labour and the London Poor*, are testimony to the value of the observing eye in assembling a thick description of the urban life of the metropolis, however much his nose, his ears and his statistic-recording pencil were also at work. Such collection of detail, in different forms, crowds the painting and fiction of the period, establishing a materiality, a circumstantiality which in turn becomes imbricated with interpretive resonances for both contemporary and subsequent commentators who acknowledge the degree to which the representation of objects entails the encoding of values.

This preoccupation with the visible, recordable world on the

part of many Victorians has been continually remarked upon in recent years. 'The second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible', wrote Jean-Louis Comolli, basing his assertion on 'the social multiplication of images'. He specifically had in mind the access to visual information which the invention and growth of the illustrated press and photography brought with them, providing information about one's own nation and culture, and, more particularly, about the unfamiliar. The period witnessed, as he put it, 'something of a geographical extension of the field of the visible and the representable: by journies, explorations, colonisations, the whole world becomes visible at the same time that it becomes appropriable'.² David Spurr, too, writing about the part the gaze comes to play in colonial discourse generally, pertinently reminds one that 'The gaze is never innocent or pure, never free of mediation by motives which may be judged noble or otherwise. The writer's eye is always in some sense colonizing the landscape, mastering and portioning, fixing zones and poles, arranging and deepening the scene as the object of desire.'³ Whilst Comolli and Spurr both suggest the hegemonic power of Western scopic techniques in capturing and representing other cultures, a power which may also be turned on one's more immediate society, the same mechanical apparatuses can be remarked on as affecting domestic understandings of selfhood.⁴ Mayhew, again, visits a photographer's studio, and the tradesman claims that it is quite possible to palm off customers with portraits of sitters other than themselves: 'The fact is, people don't know their own faces. Half of 'em have never looked in a glass half a dozen times in their life, and directly they see a pair of eyes and a nose, they fancy they are their own.'⁵ Even if Mayhew, just possibly, was also being duped by this photographer, who, judging by his testimony, took pride in his role as a trickster preying upon the credulous, the claim conveys the novelty which could be involved in obtaining visual knowledge, of fixing and objectifying an image of the self.

The dissemination of images, whether photographic or engraved, was made possible by the development of the press and the diminishing costs of newsprint and printing technologies.⁶ Such periodicals as the *Illustrated London News* (founded 1841) and the *Graphic* (founded 1869) relied as much, if not more, on images as

on words in their representation of the world: they had numerous imitators, some successful, some short-lived, such as the *Pictorial Times*, the *Illustrated Times*, *Pen and Pencil*, the *Penny Illustrated Paper* and *Quiver*.⁷ The editor of the *Strand* magazine (founded 1891) insisted on a picture on every page. *Punch* (founded 1841) provided a running commentary on Victorian social trends and political issues through its combination of cartoons and captions.⁸ In both periodical and volume form, fiction's appeal to the imagination could find itself circumscribed or supplemented by the provision of illustrations: illustrations which – most notably in the case of Thackeray and Dickens – could provide an interpretive gloss on the written word.⁹ Knowledge could also be acquired through other forms of visual display: from such crowd-pulling phenomena as the Exhibitions which celebrated the commerce and art of particular nations;¹⁰ through panoramas, in which the spectator perambulated in front of a huge image, and dioramas, when the representation of landscapes or events moved in front of the audience; to displays of racial types which mingled anthropological curiosity with elements of the freak show, and the countless human 'curiosities' displayed by showmen.¹¹ More permanent display of material artifacts was provided by the increasing quantities of museums in the capital and in the provinces, particularly after the 1845 Museums Act, and the Museums and Libraries Act of 1850, allowed local boroughs to allocate a proportion of the rates for the establishment of such public amenities. The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition (founded 1769) – the 'great annual commercial advertisement of all the art of the day'¹² – sustained its domination over the London art scene throughout the nineteenth century, joined by the growing number of art exhibitions which were mounted both in this city and in other metropolitan centres. The Old Water-Colour Society had been holding exhibitions since 1804; the British Institution put on shows between 1806 and 1867; the Society of British Artists was founded in 1824. Notably pioneering both in the art it promoted and in exhibition staging was the Grosvenor Gallery (1877–90), its relatively avant-garde mantle passing to the New Gallery in 1888.¹³ Responses to all these shows, and to paintings exhibited in private salerooms and venues, combined with the proliferation of the press itself to see the establishment in turn of certain dominant modes of

writing about art, translating the visual into the verbal for the non-specialist spectator.¹⁴

Other optical inventions brought the excitement of looking differently into the domestic environment itself: the magic lantern, the kaleidoscope, the stereoscope, the pseudoscope, the zoetrope. As Isobel Armstrong has eloquently put it, such gadgets meant 'a sensory experience without a sensory, tactile image, an image that was more spectral the more reproducible it became, so that the gazing subject played a risky game with materiality and phantasmagoria . . . Possibly the intense allure of these gadgets was their capacity to suggest experiments with different subject positions, control, displacement, obliteration, power, centrality, powerlessness.'¹⁵ These instruments, together with the marvels of visual scale produced by the telescope and the increasingly domesticated microscope, served to challenge, at the level of popular perception, the quality of observations made by the unaided human eye. Outside the home, distinctions between the public and the domestic were collapsed by the burgeoning amount of imagery which advertised and boosted consumer culture – on hoardings, in the press, in the form of window displays and spectacular promotions. Mass production used visual means to circulate ideals, to stimulate desire. 'Spectacle and capitalism', to quote Thomas Richards, 'became indivisible'.¹⁶ The co-presence of iconography and letterpress in advertisement form turned the streets quite literally into environments to be read, a practice carried mimetically into paintings of modern life and thence turned to interpretive ends. Thus in the third painting in Augustus Egg's triptych *Past and Present* (1858), the woman huddled under the Adelphi arches by the side of the Thames is given an ironic chorus of posters on the wall behind her (figure 1). A playbill turns emotions into entertainment ('Victims'; 'A Cure for Love'); an advertisement for 'Pleasure Excursions to Paris' in this context suggests the short-sightedness of hedonism, or at the very least the lures of the world which have led this woman to adultery, disgrace and – given that she is now sitting in a notorious suicide haunt – presumably death.¹⁷ In Luke Fildes's painting of a queue waiting to enter the workhouse, *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (1874), a sharp commentary on the social evaluation of the homeless poor is given by the backdrop of advertisements,



1 Augustus Leopold Egg, 'August the 4th. Have just heard that B— has been dead more than a fortnight, so his poor children have now lost both parents. I hear she was seen on Friday last near the Strand, evidently without a place to lay her head. What a fall hers has been!' (known as *Past and Present*), no. 3, 1858. Oil on canvas, 63.5 × 76.2 cms.

where £2 reward is offered for a missing child, £20 for a missing dog, £50 for a murderer and £100 for a runaway (figure 2).

Tracing this undeniable 'culte des images'¹⁸ across a range of contexts is not enough in itself, however, to establish the visual as the dominant mode of the Victorian period. More recent methodological approaches have been crucial here. The publication of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in 1975 famously drew attention to the power of the gaze within Victorian social formations. Foucault postulated the notion of the 'carceral archipelago', a network of supervisory surveillance that derives its model from the Benthamite panoptic scheme of a prison where the occupants



2 Luke Fildes,
*Applicants for
Admission to a Casual
Ward*, 1874. Oil on
canvas,
142.24 × 247.65 cms.

would be visible, in their lighted cells, from a central tower. He uses the language of staged formalised display to describe how this system reverses the principle of the prison, where the inmate is enclosed, hidden in darkness:

By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognise immediately . . . Visibility is a trap.¹⁹

This 'axial visibility', Foucault goes on to argue, may in fact be traced through 'all the disciplinary mechanisms that function throughout society'. If the Panopticon induces in the inmate 'a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power', this same anxiety of observation permeates the 'panoptic society' of the nineteenth century.²⁰

Foucault's theories have proved to be enormously influential with interpreters of Victorian culture since the mid-1980s, many of whom have followed his line that to make something visible is to gain not just understanding of it, but control over it. This process

has been repeatedly located within Victorian practices themselves – practices both material and linguistic – with their presumed drive towards exposure, towards bringing things to the surface, towards making things available to the eye and hence ready for interpretation. The drive to exposure in a literal sense conjoins with the visual bias within Western culture so eloquently described by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*, where he describes how our language is infused with visual metaphors, the visual manifesting its dominance not merely in terms of perceptual experience, but also as a cultural trope. Victorian ways of seeing, in broad terms, were both modelled upon, and effectively legitimated by, certain dominant strands within contemporary science, especially the work of physiologists, and of natural scientists, whose work with the microscope in particular provided an endless source of comments filtering into popular culture about how the invisible could be brought to view, and how knowledge and control over the natural world could thus be obtained.

Other technologies permitted new positions of spectatorship which afforded an overview, an altered mode of vision. ‘The railroad’, to quote Dolf Sternberger, transformed the world ‘into a panorama that could be experienced . . . it turned the travelers’ eyes outward and offered them the opulent nourishment of ever changing images that were the only possible thing that could be experienced during the journey’.²¹ This quantitative increase of visual stimuli could, however, be figured as exhausting, through the physical and mental strain it allegedly adduced. The Report of the Commission into the influence of railway travelling on public health (1862) commented anxiously on the bodily effects of this new mode of looking:

The rapidity and variety of the impressions necessarily fatigue both the eye and the brain. The constantly varying distance at which the objects are placed involves an incessant shifting of the adaptive apparatus by which they are focused upon the retina; and the mental effort by which the brain takes cognizance of them is scarcely less productive of cerebral wear because it is unconscious.²²

Whilst the themes of almost all Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painted canvases are marked by nostalgia, archaism or the mystical, 'A Trip to Paris and Belgium' – based on his travels on the continent with Holman Hunt in 1850 – dramatises the visual disruption of modern railway travel, the 'floating at our eyes', that is the product of 'Strong extreme speed, that the brain hurries with'. The passengers move between brick walls, 'passed so at once / That for the suddenness I cannot know / Or what, or where begun, or where at end'. 'The country swims with motion', he writes, as he records shifting effects of sky and light as he journeys through the landscapes of poplar trees, the countryside slanted with sunlight and shadows, that the Impressionists were to explore in their paintings: 'Time itself / Is consciously beside us, and perceived.'²³

Moving skyward, the balloon allowed its passengers to shift their perspective on the urban scene in the most literal of terms.²⁴ Henry Mayhew and John Binny's *The Criminal Prisons of London* (1862) introduces their survey of actual forms of incarceration with a sustained commentary on how 'it is an exquisite treat to all minds to find that they have the power, by their mere vision, of extending their consciousness to scenes and objects that are miles away', with the intellect experiencing 'a special delight in being able to comprehend all the minute particulars of a subject under one associate whole', bringing, for example, 'the intricate network of the many thoroughfares . . . into the compass of one large web'. Such a viewpoint may be achieved from the balloon's basket. Yet aerial flight can change perspective still further. At first, in language which has become clichéd through descriptions of subsequent air travel, each object is distinct: houses looking 'like the tiny wooden things out of a child's box of toys', barges like summer insects, factory chimneys like pins.²⁵ Then, however, the description shifts the locus of perspective from the visible to the metaphorical, hence emphasising what will become one of the concerns underpinning my own study, the constant slippage from concern with viewing the material world to inner forms of vision. The chapter draws heavily on an account written by Mayhew of the ascent he made in the last flight of the famous balloon

‘Nassau’, in which the transition from outer to inward perception is even more sharply delineated:

I had seen the world of London below the surface, as it were, and I had a craving to contemplate it far above it – to behold the immense mass of vice and avarice and cunning, of noble aspirations and humble heroism, blent into one black spot; to take, as it were, an angel’s view of that huge city where, perhaps, there is more virtue and more iniquity, more wealth and more want huddled together in one vast heap than in any other part of the earth; to look down upon the strange, incongruous clump of palaces and workhouses, of factory chimneys and church steeples, of banks and prisons, of docks and hospitals, of parks and squares, of courts and alleys – to look down upon these as the birds of the air look down upon them, and see the whole dwindle into a heap of rubbish on the green sward, a human ant-hill, as it were; to hear the hubbub of the restless sea of life below, and hear it like the ocean in a shell, whispering to you of the incessant strugglings and chafings of the distant tide – to swing in the air far above all the petty jealousies and heart-burnings, and small ambitions and vain parades, and feel for once tranquil as a babe in a cot – that you were hardly of the earth earthy; and to find, as you drank in the pure thin air above you, the blood dancing and tingling joyously through your veins, and your whole spirit becoming etherealised as, Jacob-like, you mounted the aërial ladder, and beheld the world beneath you fade and fade from your sight like a mirage in the desert; to feel yourself really, as you had ideally in your dreams, floating through the endless realms of space, sailing among the stars free as ‘the lark at heaven’s gate’; and to enjoy for a brief half-hour at least a foretaste of that elysian destiny which is the hope of all.²⁶

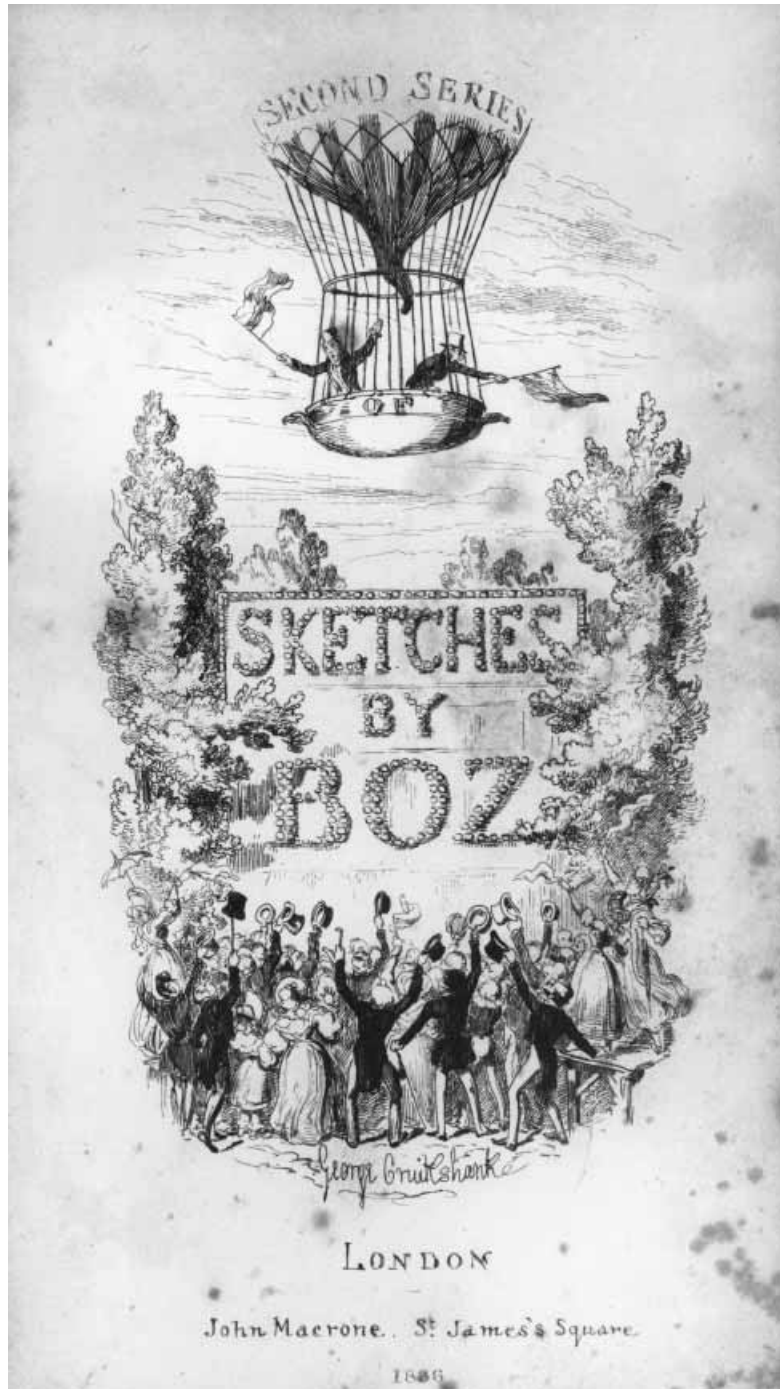
Specific panoptic awareness may readily be located across a range of writing. In Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), a novel dominated by images and actions of scrutiny and surveillance, M. Paul takes a room in one of the college boarding-houses, ‘nominally for a study – virtually for a post of observation’, from which he looks down and inspects ‘female human nature’ as displayed in the *pen-*

sionnat garden.²⁷ Famously, in Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) the detective Bucket 'mounts a high tower in his mind' to survey, in his imagination, the haunts of social outcasts in order to try and locate Lady Dedlock: a power displaced in this novel from individual human agency to the superior vantage point available to the mobile narrative voice.²⁸ It is logical, therefore, that when looking at urban topographies in Dickens, Jonathan Arac can conjoin Foucauldian method with Dickens's own desire, in chapter 47 of *Dombey and Son*, for 'a good spirit who would take the house-tops off' and expose the social and moral corruption within contemporary London;²⁹ something which is partially enacted when Dombey's railway journey enables him to see into the 'wretched rooms . . . where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes' in those slums through which the railway has sliced, letting 'the light of day in on these things'.³⁰ Dickens's commitment to the concept of a literal overview had already been signalled by Cruikshank's incorporation of a rising balloon in the frontispiece to *Sketches by Boz* (figure 3). This desire for disclosure is recapitulated in Conan Doyle's 'A Case of Identity' (1891), when Sherlock Holmes observes to Watson:

'If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most *outré* results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable'.³¹

When this story was first published in the *Strand*, incidentally, it was immediately followed by an article entitled 'London from Aloft', not merely describing a balloon flight over the capital, but illustrating it with pictures taken by a Kodak camera.³²

Moving indoors, D. A. Miller has extended the concepts of unseen but all-seeing surveillance, working in the service of what Foucault calls 'a regime of the norm' and combining with 'various technologies of the self and its sexuality', from their functioning in a publicly administered arena to 'the private and domestic sphere



3 George Cruikshank, frontispiece to Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, second series, 1836.

on which the very identity of the liberal subject depends'.³³ At a less metaphorical level, Anthea Trodd writes how 'In mid-Victorian fictions of domestic crime we see a world of spying servants, conspiring wives, intrusive policemen, in which the home is threatened from within and without, and the irreconcilable claims of the private and public spheres exposed.'³⁴

Disciplinary surveillance is not the only aspect of Foucault's fascination with the visible to be built upon. Jeremy Tambling, for example, has drawn not just on *Discipline and Punish*, but on *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), and in particular on the passage Foucault quotes from Bichat's *Anatomie générale* advising the making visible of that which lies below the human surface: 'Open up a few corpses: you will dissipate at once the darkness that observation alone could not dissipate.'³⁵ Tambling relates this imagery of illumination both to George Eliot's interest in Bichat himself, as evidenced in chapter 15 of *Middlemarch*, and to the more general imagery that we encounter in this novel. This is a novel permeated, as a number of critics have noted, with optical imagery,³⁶ imagery which is employed to suggest the importance of throwing light on social anatomy – piercing 'the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy',³⁷ as one of the phrases which links novelist and physician puts it – moving from an exploration of the body to wider concerns; a thematics of imagery which, as in Holmes's phrase, connects concept with the formal organisation of fiction.

A Foucauldian reading of the nineteenth century emphasises the fact that practices of surveillance, of bringing material to the surface, worked in collaboration with practices of codification and classification. In turn, this was linked to a broader aesthetic drive: what Mark Seltzer has termed the 'realist imperative of making everything, including aesthetic states, visible, legible, and governable'.³⁸ Many of these classificatory procedures are well known, from the growth in statistical societies to the establishment of the British Museum Catalogue; from cartography to the work of natural historians; from graphology manuals to dictionaries of plants and of dreams. Almost inevitably, the determinants of classification were dependent, to at least some extent, on the

recognition of something's, or someone's, material existence or properties, which were subsequently ordered according to certain schemata. Symptomatically, in terms of recent studies of such enterprises, Thomas Richards remarks in *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (1993): 'The ordering of the world and its knowledges into a unified field was located explicitly in the register of representation.'³⁹ Numerous recent critics of the Victorian period suggest that if we can understand the laws and associations that governed systems of representation during this period, and the symbolic resonances that are at stake, we can, to all intents and purposes, 'read' the Victorians. Peter Brooks, in *Body Work. Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (1993), writes of the 'semioticization' of the body during the nineteenth century:

Representing the body in modern narrative – . . . seems always to involve viewing the body. The dominant nineteenth-century tradition, that of realism, insistently makes the visual the master relation to the world, for the very premise of realism is that one cannot understand human beings outside the context of the things that surround them, and knowing these things is a matter of viewing them, detailing them, and describing the concrete milieux in which men and women enact their destinies.⁴⁰

Brooks's foregrounding of the body is crucial, because it points us to the central site for debates concerning the relationship between inner and outer, between assumptions concerning surface and essence on the one hand, and the misleading guidance which exteriors can offer about interiority on the other.

The idea was widespread, in the mid-century, that different social types, and different types of character, were physiognomically distinguishable. Not only faces in their entirety offered themselves up to be read, but facial expressions (pathognomy), lines on the forehead (metoposcopy), lines on the hand (chiromancy and chirognomy), and moles (neomancy) were all available for deciphering. This assumption that the appearance of bodies revealed the truth about the person who inhabited it was not confined to ideas concerning individual personality traits. Notoriously, after

the mid-century, it became an increasingly consolidated article of faith that racial characteristics were irrevocably inscribed through the measurable size and shape of the human body.⁴¹

'Nature', asserted Dickens in an article, 'never writes a bad hand. Her writing, as it may be read in the human countenance, is invariably legible, if we come at all trained to the reading of it.'⁴² Eliza Lynn, in her 1855 *Household Words* article 'Passing Faces', said that one might expect to discover not just the individual secrets of those we encounter through looking at their physiognomies, but 'their social condition and their histories, stamped on them as legibly as arms are painted on a carriage-panel',⁴³ Mary Cowling, in *The Artist as Anthropologist* (1989), has valuably shown quite how readily both artists and anthropologists, following in the wake of such physiologists as F. G. Gall, seized on external appearance, particularly the faces of those in modern urban crowds, as providing a quick indication of the character of an individual. This pleasure is linked to a form of understanding and control – however illusory – derived from the belief that it is possible, through observation, to gain knowledge of the mass, to turn faceless anonymity into individuality and hence render it less disturbing and threatening. In turn, Cowling argues, the widespread acceptance of physiognomy as a method of human interpretation, and the notion of the anthropological type, 'help us to understand the kind of interest and pleasure which Victorian modern life art offered'.⁴⁴ Such interpretation rested on the assumptions articulated by Lavater in his *Essays on Physiognomy*, first published in Leipzig in 1774–8 and unceasingly in demand until around 1870: 'is not all nature physiognomy; superficies, and contents; body, and spirit; exterior effect, and internal power; invisible beginning, and visible ending?'⁴⁵ As Hippolyte Taine observed in his *History of English Literature* (1863): 'When you consider with your eyes the visible man, what do you look for? The man invisible.'⁴⁶

Yet it would be wrong to assume an absolute acceptance by mid-Victorians of these populist tenets. Notwithstanding Dickens's compulsive fascination with personal appearance, it is notable that in *Hard Times* (1854), a novel which protests against classification as

a means of dealing with individuals, he rebels, too, against the language of physiognomy. He describes the mill-hand, Stephen Blackpool, thus: 'A rather stooping man, with a knitted brow, a pondering expression of face, and a hard-looking head sufficiently capacious, on which his iron-grey hair lay long and thin, Old Stephen might have passed for a particularly intelligent man in his condition. Yet he was not.'⁴⁷ More provocatively, George Eliot pointedly shows us in *Adam Bede* (1859) that appearance may be a less sure guide to character than *assumptions* about appearance are a reflection of the mind and the desires of the perceiver. In turn, this is metonymic of the way in which even Eliot's earliest fiction manifests, as Catherine Gallagher puts it, 'a deep skepticism about the legibility of facts, the apprehendable significance of appearances'.⁴⁸ The narrator warningly describes Adam's wishful responses to Hetty's prettiness:

Every man under such circumstances is conscious of being a great physiognomist. Nature, he knows, has a language of her own, which she uses with strict veracity, and he considers himself an adept in the language. Nature has written out his bride's character for him in those exquisite lines of cheek and lip and chin, in those eyelids delicate as petals, in those long lashes curled like the stamen of a flower, in the dark liquid depths of those wonderful eyes. How she will dote on her children!

We are admonished, however, after what proves a proleptic piece of irony: 'I believe the wisest of us must be beguiled in this way sometimes, and must think both better and worse of people than they deserve. Nature has her language, and she is not unveracious, but we don't know all the intricacies of her syntax just yet, and in a hasty reading we may happen to extract the very opposite of her real meaning.'⁴⁹ Later, in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), a novel much more insistently concerned with the problematics of looking, Eliot explicitly extends the untrustworthy principle of the physiognomic scrutiny of faces to more generalised acts of interpretation: 'often the grand meanings of faces as well as of written words may lie chiefly in the impressions of those who look on them'.⁵⁰ Outside fiction, others record how their own misreadings served

to unsettle their confidence in physiognomy. The art student Anna Mary Howitt, who went to study in Munich in 1853, recounts her experience of the deceptiveness of appearance. On one occasion, she and some fellow students went on an outing to a model penitentiary. Their guide drew their express attention to a group of four women clustered round a washtub, and asked what they could deduce about these inmates from their looks:

‘Three out of the four’, we remarked, ‘are the only agreeable faces we have seen in the prison; and, judging from this momentary glance at their countenances, we should say could not be guilty of much crime; perhaps the fat old woman may be so; that tall young girl, however, is not only handsome, but gentle-looking.’

‘That tall young girl’, replied our guide, ‘was the one who, a year or two ago, murdered her fellow-servant, and cutting up the body, buried it in the garden; the little woman next to her, some two years since, murdered her husband; and the handsome, kind, motherly-looking woman who stood next, destroyed her child of seven years old. The fat old woman is in only for a slight offence. So much for judgment by physiognomy!’

... As I returned home, all the faces I met in the streets seemed to me, as it were, masks. I saw faces in expression a thousand times more evil than the countenances of those three unhappy women. How was it? Was it alone that some unusually painful and frightful circumstances had aroused passions in them which only slept in the breasts of hundreds of other human beings who wander about free and honourably in the world; or was *expression*, after all, a deception?⁵¹

Despite this continuing interrogation of the certitude with which the surface of the body rendered character legible, the idea endured the nineteenth century, receiving its updated scientific imprimatur through the absorption, in part, of Cesare Lombroso’s typology of criminal degeneracy. In turn, this was challenged in a way that simultaneously called assumptions about representation into question. In Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), the uncouth Hyde, even if bearing signs of

degeneration, genetic reversion and stuntedness, is more remarkable for the intangible and revulsion-provoking aura which he emanates than for any identifiable physical marks of evil: a counter-blast to what Stevenson deplored, in 'A Note on Realism', as the realist compulsion to make everything 'all charactered and notable, seizing the eye'.⁵²

Innately present character traits were not the only indicators of individuality which were believed, at least by some, to be decipherable from a body's appearance. Indeed, Dickens's argument in the article already cited, 'The Demeanour of Murderers', is that actions come to show their traces on human faces, rather than that physiological characteristics are invariably indicative of a predisposition to criminal activity. This is the developmental commonplace on which Oscar Wilde builds when showing that the palm of Lord Arthur Savile comes to bear the stigmata of a murderer, or, indeed, when dramatically displacing Dorian Gray's transgressions onto the features of his portrait. Codes of physical legibility are, however, not confined to moral histories, but operate in far more materialist contexts. One need only recall Sherlock Holmes's famous statement that 'By a man's finger-nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boots, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt-cuffs – by each of these things a man's calling is plainly revealed',⁵³ such noting of detail itself being advocated by the master detective as part of necessary training in the capacity to observe and deduce. As Holmes's own masterful adoption of disguises intimates, and the blurring of the physical – finger-nails and calluses – with clothing in his proclamation to Watson suggests, identity came to be recognised as something which was not innate, but performative – the type of performativity recognised by Henry James when he makes Madame Merle, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, say that 'One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.'⁵⁴ In fact, the whole Victorian literary fascination with disguise and its capacity to deceive successfully – from Mayhew's beggars with their carefully concocted sores, through Isabel Vane, hiding behind her blue-

tinted spectacles in *East Lynne*, to Rudyard Kipling's Kim's capacity (apart from, one presumes, his tell-tale Irish eyes) to pass as a bazaar-boy – may be seen as a counter-current to the belief in the sufficiency of physiognomic encodement.⁵⁵ Additionally, and with no performative deliberation on the part of their occupants, one encounters those skins which have been both literally and figuratively inscribed with the marks of toil: Boucher's drowned corpse, in Gaskell's *North and South*, stained with the industrial dye which pollutes the streams of Milton; Tess's arms, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, scratched and torn by field work, which may be read both as a sign of labour, and as a displacement of the way in which sexual activity has lacerated her.⁵⁶

As with the individual body, the understanding of society as a whole relied on the gathering and organisation of information about its parts. This has led to systemic readings of Victorian culture based upon what several commentators have isolated as a significant feature of the period: its dependence, across a variety of fields, on the accumulation and precise recording of detail. The importance of this proliferation of detail has been discussed in relation to a range of contexts. Thus Carol Christ considered the problems of relating details to the whole at a time when the collapse of religious belief, and the co-terminous developments in political and scientific theories, left the individual isolate: 'conceiving of the universe as a mass of particulars led logically to seeing experience as wholly subjective and particular', and she traces the effect this response to detail had on Victorian poets.⁵⁷ More common, however, is the linkage of crowded detail with the literary – usually fictional – and artistic practice of realism, with its stress on the solid and the circumstantial, creating the rhetoric whereby the reader or spectator may believe that the world represented is in some way continuous with their own.⁵⁸ 'It is almost by now a truism of criticism', remarked Laurie Langbauer in 1990, 'that the classical realism of nineteenth-century novels especially draws on metaphors of sight for its effect',⁵⁹ and she went on to cite Mark Seltzer's observation that the techniques of realism, with their emphasis on the particularities of the all-seeing narrator's vision, 'are concerned "with seeing, with a seeing in detail",

. . . to aid our acceptance as subjects not just of one true unified vision but of an invisible supervision'.⁶⁰ Some critics, notably Herbert Sussman and George Landow, have pointed to the ways in which particular employment of detail, particularly in Pre-Raphaelite work, stands for spiritual significance made manifest, through systems of typological symbolism, in the material world.⁶¹ Chris Brooks, in *Signs for the Times* (1984), relates such Pre-Raphaelite manipulation of detail to a broader European metaphysical context, taking as his starting point Thomas Carlyle's own individualistic expansion of German transcendentalism in *Sartor Resartus*, and his insistence that in the field of human investigation, there are material objects, which may be seen by the bodily eye, and there are invisible objects, which not only cannot be seen by any eye, but which cannot be pictured or imaged in the mind. In particular, Brooks takes up Carlyle's comment that 'All visible things are emblems; what thou seest is not there on its own account; strictly taken, is not there at all: Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea, and *body* it forth.'⁶² He uses this to explore what he terms 'symbolic realism' at work in Dickens, in Pre-Raphaelite painting and in mid-Victorian architecture.

Such a model of inner and outer representation and signification, however, is a very static one. Carlyle is also notable for his voicing of a sense – later developed into the webs and circulatory systems of Darwin and Herbert Spencer, Eliot and Hardy – that there are hidden 'bonds that unite us one and all'. In their material form, these may be observed as a 'venous-arterial circulation, of Letters, verbal Messages, paper and other Packages, going out from [an individual] and coming in . . . a blood-circulation, visible to the eye'. Such filaments of communication, however, are no more than symbols of 'the finer nervous circulation, by which all things, the minutest that he does, minutely influence all men, and the very look of his face blesses or curses whomso it lights on, and so operates ever new blessing or new cursing: all this you cannot see, but only imagine'.⁶³

Yet despite Carlyle's warning, crucial to my own argument, that the unseen may be more powerful than the seen, countless

metaphors within Victorian writing substantiate the drive towards specularly to which many critics of the late twentieth century attest. It is such a desire to uncover which led Charlotte Brontë, in the preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, to write that the world has found it 'convenient to make external show pass for sterling worth – to let white-washed walls vouch for clean shrines. It may hate him who dares to scrutinise and expose – to rase the gilding, and show base metal under it – to penetrate the sepulchre, and reveal charnel relics: but, hate as it will, it is indebted to him.'⁶⁴ As Brontë makes apparent in Gothically chilling language, to reveal is not always to put on display that which is pleasant, but revelation is informed by a desire to lay bare the truth, whatever the cost to one's peace of mind. Whilst Brontë is primarily concerned with individual morality and hypocrisy, however symptomatic these may be of wider social failings, the language of exposure increasingly resonates through acts of unveiling designed to illuminate areas of ignorance in relation to general social spheres.

The current fascination with the legibility of Victorian surfaces and the apparent transparency of signifying systems has not, of course, gone unchallenged. The very stability of the visible has partly been called into question by those who, like Jonathan Crary, have demonstrated how early nineteenth-century investigations in optical science, involving both optical devices and physiological experiments, led to the growing acceptance that visualisation is itself dependent upon cerebral process, and to the accumulation of knowledge 'about the constitutive role of the body in the apprehension of a visible world'.⁶⁵ He describes, in other words, the movement from an eighteenth-century model of the camera obscura, with its implicit postulation of the objective observer, to the admission of subjectivity into vision (whilst noting that, as Victorians themselves readily admitted, the acknowledgement of the role of subjectivity in seeing had taken place long before their own century). However, as W. J. T. Mitchell has effectively, if sympathetically, pointed out, Crary's argument is weakened by the way his 'skepticism about the "single nineteenth century observer"' leads him, against all logic, to conclude that there is *no*

observer, except in the “dominant model” he has extracted from physiological optics and optical technology’.⁶⁶ One of the central aims of my own study is to reinstate what might be thought of as the particularities of spectatorship: considering not just the intense attention which was paid to the mechanics of the eye, and the growing interest in the linked involvement of the unconscious, but, through investigating the terms in which visual acts were discussed and recorded, I shall be considering the ends which looking at art was made to serve. This means going way beyond discussions concerning the immediate operations of the eye, despite their proliferation during the whole period, and considering the act of viewing in the light of other current practices employed in the interpretation of culture, dependent upon, and reinforcing, the hidden, invisible, interwoven threads of ideology.

One should, however, avoid falling into the trap of believing that Victorians necessarily privileged the importance of visibility: as Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* has already been used to indicate, the unseen could be far more suggestive than the seen. This could hold true not just in a straightforward religious sense, but also in a more Carlylean metaphysical one.⁶⁷ For in what follows, I shall be drawing extensively on scientific writing, and emphasising the frequent interpenetration of its concerns with literary and artistic culture. This influence had its limits. In particular, and tellingly – telling, that is, when it comes to assessing how people were actively encouraged to look at works of art – it was – as we shall see in chapter 7 – rarely drawn upon by those whose professional task it was to describe and encourage the act of seeing and interpretation.⁶⁸ Aside from this, however, the insistence by numerous scientists on the importance of the imagination drew together differing fields of speculative activity.⁶⁹ Yet the most far-thinking of scientists were quick to express reservations about the extent of their vision and powers. Thomas Huxley, for example, wrote in ‘Science and Morals’ that ‘Nobody, I imagine, will credit me with a desire to limit the empire of physical science, but I really feel bound to confess that a great many very familiar and, at the same time, extremely important phenomena lie quite beyond its legitimate limits.’⁷⁰ John Tyndall remarked in 1860 that ‘The territory of

physics is wide, but it has its limits from which we look with vacant gaze into the region beyond.⁷¹ Not everything, in other words, may be explained by science; not everything can be read according to attending to what is visible, however alertly. 'Once at the sacred heat that opens regions beyond ordinary vision', Forster wrote of Dickens's power in creating individualised characters, 'imagination has its own laws.'⁷²

Not to be able to see with the physical eye is to call into play the powerful forces of imagination and memory. Such an idea was one of the most powerful legacies of the early Romantic writers on Victorian sensibilities. As Akenside put it in his 1772 version of *Pleasures of Imagination*, in which he considers the importance not so much of perception, but of the memory of perception:

To man alone
Of sublunary beings was it given
Each fleeting impulse on the sensual powers
At leisure to review; with equal eye
To scan the passion of the stricken nerve
Or the vague object striking; to conduct
From sense, the portal turbulent and loud,
Into the mind's wide palace one by one
The frequent, pressing, fluctuating forms,
And question and compare them.⁷³

Memory may certainly prove preferable to an image which, through its function as simulacrum, signifies loss more powerfully than presence. After the death of George Lewes, George Eliot wrote to Elma Stuart that she had no regret whatsoever that she possessed no portrait or bust of him. Indeed, she was bitterly repentant that she had been led into buying an enlarged copy of his photographic portrait: 'It is smoothed down and altered, and each time I look at it I feel its *unlikeness* more. *Himself as he was* is what I see inwardly, and I am afraid of outward images lest they should corrupt the inward.'⁷⁴ This anecdote suggests a personal enactment of the belief put into Will Ladislav's mouth in *Middlemarch*, that 'Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within.'⁷⁵ The connection of this

belief with the language of contemporary scientific investigation – indeed, with those processes which aided the operations of the human eye through optical enhancement – is brought home by the passage in the same novel when, commenting on the actions of the imagination, the narrative voice remarks how Lydgate values that particular form of imagination ‘that reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens, but tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is the last refinement of Energy, capable of bathing even the ethereal atoms in its ideally illuminated space’.⁷⁶

In more recent critical terms, a considerable challenge to the assumption that easy legibility is desirable has necessarily come from those whose attention has focussed on questions of language. In particular, critics writing on Victorian poetry – a form less closely associated with realism than either the novel or painting during this period – point to the fact that while optical metaphors abound in poetical works, this mode of writing, with its capacity to cut away narrative links, and to revel in a play of formal elements, including elusive symbols, evades that analysis which looks to readily decipherable systems of representation.⁷⁷ Jerome McGann’s *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (1989) – spanning writing from Blake to Pound – argues against the Kantian tradition that insists on the value of empirical experience in acquiring knowledge, and claims that the ‘truth-functions’ of poetry ‘have grown to seem increasingly displaced from actuality’,⁷⁸ or, in other words, that poetry’s referential quality matters far less than its emotive or metaphysical potential: it is a domain in which knowledge is a form of activity, rather than involving the possession of an idea. Isobel Armstrong’s *Victorian Poetry* (1993) in many places supports McGann’s argument from within the Victorian period, tracing the history of those nineteenth-century commentators on poetic language, both critics and practitioners, who drew repeated attention to the tantalising, frustrating, but suggestive gap between word and thing, and who exploited the potential of this. W. David Shaw, in *Victorians and Mystery. Crises of Representation* (1990), explores a whole range of topoi – in fiction as well as in poetry – which proved resistant to representation, grouping his

examples around the unconscious (including attempts to fill agnostic voids with meaningful signs, and the problem of showing God's hiddenness); around mysteries of identity, including self-knowledge and interiority; and around the kind of problems of historical reconstruction that were faced by Browning, and the inadequacies of fictional detectives when it came to grasping the minds of their criminal suspects. More generally, and with useful reference to psychoanalytic theory, Peggy Phelan has attempted, in *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance* (1993), to 'revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable',⁷⁹ arguing that there may be power in remaining invisible – since visibility summons surveillance and the law, provokes fetishism, stimulates colonial appetites for possession. The invisible, she maintains, is 'representation's supplemental excess and its failure to be totalizing'.⁸⁰

This challenge to the adequacy of representation, to the sufficiency of the visible, was expressed in a range of ways by the Victorians, and it is this challenge which I seek to explore. I am not so much concerned to examine debates which specifically centre on the limitations of language as I am to investigate some of those challenges which erupt *through* literary and artistic acts of representation themselves. I wish to call into question, in other words, some prevalent beliefs about the Victorians' assumed drive towards specularità. In sum, this study sets out to show that though the visual was, indeed, of paramount importance to the Victorians, it was a heavily problematised category. The terms of this problematisation in fact tell us a good deal not just about how Victorians 'saw' and interpreted the world, but about how they understood, accepted or interrogated the relationship between language and its objects.

It is very readily apparent that, whilst fascinated by the operations of the eye, both scientific thinkers and, to a lesser degree, writers who concentrated on aesthetic issues drew attention to its physiological instability, and also its limitations. In popular scientific writing, whether oriented towards medical matters, or towards the importance of observing the natural world, the wonderful, miraculous properties of vision were endlessly stressed, by

scientific specialists and journalistic generalists alike. The natural philosopher Sir David Brewster, whose own works relate chiefly to optical investigations, reviewing a range of recent books about ocular science in 1856, summarised the qualities of touch and taste and smell and hearing, before celebrating sight for being able both to study the vastness and minutiae of the natural world, and to penetrate into the heart of life itself. 'The sight alone', he asserts, 'lays open the prolific cells of vegetable and animal organization, and displays to the astonished inquirer the structure of those wonderful tissues which cover the fountains of intellectual and animal life.'⁸¹ Writing the same year, the popularising writer Joseph Turnley brought out *The Language of the Eye*, in which, after some broad remarks about how 'the life of the eye . . . cannot be imitated, nor its absence compensated',⁸² he first describes, with a very fanciful grasp of biology, how the physiological structure of the eye works as a miniature version of the whole body ('this little organ repeats in itself the whole of man, which is the highest and most complete organisation').⁸³ He proceeds to praise the eye's beauty as well as its manifold functions, and then discusses the different ways in which the expressions of the eye may be read, for 'it is certain that the eye gives the promptest and surest indication of mental motion'.⁸⁴ Health, moral condition and intellectual cultivation will all show themselves in the eye, and plates illustrating different ocular expressions are included (figures 4 and 5). Thus 'Love wears a flowing, full eye . . . the iris glistens, as though beaming in humid pearls; confidence sits gallantly enthroned in the enlarged pupil';⁸⁵ 'the eye of Imagination seems to look through all presence, and calmly regards that which others see not'.⁸⁶ This practice of interpreting the expression of the eye does not just apply to ascertaining the condition of the individual, for we are exhorted to 'look on the nations under slavery; how dull, sullen, dissatisfied, is the expression of the eye, as though rapture and real temperament were put back for want of exercise of independence'.⁸⁷ Gender difference is indicated through the eye ('the eye of man is the most firm; woman's the most flexible . . . Man's surveys and observes; woman's glances').⁸⁸ Eyes are everywhere;



4 Illustration, 'Love', Joseph Turnley, *The Language of the Eye*, 1856.



5 Illustration, 'Imagination', Joseph Turnley, *The Language of the Eye*, 1856.

'nature is full of eyes; the past, the present, and the future are full of eyes', and looking over all of these, in turn, is God's 'kind eye . . . the externality of sight of the searching One'.⁸⁹

The eye was traditionally the window to the soul, and this, combined with the implications raised by the continual presence of a divine, unseen watcher, was in part responsible for the fascination of the interplay between the seen and the unseen. Thomas Bull, himself blind, elaborated on this idea as making the human organ superior to that of other creatures: 'The human eye is more beautiful in its construction than that of any other of God's handiworks. In the eagle and the hawk, in the gazelle and the feline tribe, the perfection of the eye is admirable; but in the human eye there is a glory which excelleth these. The spirit speaketh through the eye'.⁹⁰ The popular naturalist, Joseph Wood, was even more explicit about this duality, claiming that

The sight of the eye, the most precious of all a man's physical gifts, is only a parable of that truer sight of the world which makes a man a poet, an artist, a lover, a spiritual creature. To 'see the unseen' is the paradox of religion as it is the crowning glory of man . . . Properly speaking, Sight and Insight are not two antagonistic tendencies, but opposite poles of one and the same magnet.⁹¹

Other writers, however, temper and mediate their praise, when it comes to considering the human physiological faculty on its own, operating independently of spiritual influence. 'A long list of indictments might indeed be brought against the eye', announced Tyndall, in a lecture on light: '—its opacity, its want of symmetry, its lack of achromatism, its absolute blindness, in part. All these taken together caused Helmholtz to say that if any optician sent him an instrument so full of defects, he would be justified in sending it back with the severest censure.' Notwithstanding the theoretical problems with the eye, however, Tyndall concluded that 'as a practical instrument . . . it must ever remain a marvel to the reflecting mind'.⁹² Moreover, what emerges with this fascination with the physiology of seeing is an acknowledgement of the individuality

of each eye, each exercise of vision. Additionally, emphasis was laid on the importance of training the eye. Observation, however careful, is – and this came to be well recognised by Victorians – never removed from the exercise of subjectivity, and of personal investment in the act of looking. Nothing showed up the limitations of the eye so much as technological developments: not just the shifts in visual scale made possible by more sophisticated microscopes and telescopes, but also what George Eliot, in *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, termed the ‘micrometers and thermopiles and tasimeters which deal physically with the invisible, the impalpable, and the unimaginable’.⁹³ The invention around 1840 of various forms of specula which enabled one to dilate and view the body’s orifices, attempts to introduce solar or artificial light to allow the body’s cavities to be explored further, the invention of the ophthalmoscope and the laryngoscope (introduced into London in 1862), all permitted the investigation of the most intimate of interiors,⁹⁴ and enhanced the authority of the visual within medical science. ‘There is an old and trite saying that “seeing is believing”,’ wrote Alfred Meadows in the *Lancet* in 1870, ‘and, in a realistic age like the present, it might almost be said that not seeing is not believing.’⁹⁵

Photography promised an enhanced role for ocular proof in modern society, and certain recent theorists of nineteenth-century photography, notably John Tagg, have emphasised its links with practices of surveillance. Yet also, as Lindsay Smith has shown, its practices had the power to unsettle expectations concerning sight and representation, particularly with regards to demystifying geometrical or Cartesian perspective,⁹⁶ and to exposing what Walter Benjamin famously termed the ‘optical unconscious’, offering the opportunity to make us realise what we see without realising that we have seen it.⁹⁷ Moreover, the camera lens could render visible that which the human eye could not see at all. Thomas Huxley, writing of ‘The Progress of Science’ in 1887, drew attention, for example, to the camera’s capacity to record spectroscopic phenomena, and reveal ‘the existence of rays having powerful chemical energy, or beyond the visible limits of either end of the

spectrum'.⁹⁸ The most significant development in this respect was Wilhelm Roentgen's invention of the X-ray. He took the first X-ray of the human body – his wife's hand – and the concept passed swiftly into the popular cultural imagination. An advertisement of mid-1896, for example, shows a beam of strong light illuminating a cheerful-looking woman in a dentist's chair, whilst a serious-looking, older professional man examines what appears to be a photographic plate. The legend reads: 'Dr Van Buskirk applies the Röntgen Rays in his Dental Practice and finds that those habitually using SOZODONT have perfect Teeth, hard Gums, and sweet Breath' (figure 6).

Richard Proctor's article 'The Photographic Eyes of Science' elaborated further on the eye's limitations in the context of recent experiments in recording observations. The eye requires a certain time to receive and dispose of an impression, which means that it cannot take in, say, all the visual information that reaches one from a swiftly moving body – in the case of something moving as fast as a cannon-ball leaves a cannon, it may not see at all; or it may respond to rapid motion by seeing what is not, as in the case of the apparent stillness of a spinning top. An eye's power does not increase by gazing at an object for a long time – we can stare for ten minutes or an hour at a faint nebula, and never see it more clearly than we do at first. Indeed, our attention is likely to waver. Even when we believe that we have seen clearly, fully, accurately, the memory would have to be perfect to recall all that we have seen. However, in all the points where 'the eye of man is defective, an eye provided by science is practically free from fault . . . instead of the retina, with all its defects, physical and physiological, the photographic plate, wet or dry according to circumstances, is employed for scientific vision'.⁹⁹ He demonstrates how Galton's photographs of a galloping horse or swiftly flying bird, Henry Draper's long-exposed views of the great nebula of Orion, taken through a telescope, and the use of ultra-violet in recording the stars have enabled the photographic eye to achieve what the human eye could not. 'With its three eyes – the eye of keenness, the eye of patient watchfulness, and the eye of artistic truth, photography

6 Advertisement for Sozodont, *Illustrated London News*, 1896

promises', Proctor claims, 'to be a Cerberus to the science of the future . . . indeed, with photography, spectroscopy, polariscopy, and other aids, science promises soon to be Argus-eyed.'¹⁰⁰

I begin this study with a consideration of the limits of visibility: the fascination with the simultaneous presence of the seen and the unseen. The opening chapter looks at dust, a paradoxical phenomenon for many Victorians: paradoxical because it was a transmitter of disease and also productive of beauty; a possible source of life, and the base condition to which we will return; waste product, and crucial to the climatic conditions which sustain life. In its minuteness, it forms one end of the Victorian fascination with the suggestivity of the infinite, a suggestivity which was continually being pointed up by the revelations offered and promised by those optical instruments which help humans to extend their vision. The next chapter shows how, even in the 1850s, artists themselves could suggest the limitations of physical sight. In reading John Everett Millais's *The Blind Girl*, I propose that it functions as a paradigm through which we may understand Victorian awareness of the inadequacy of the eye, and, through linking its topos of blindness to the language and themes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), the terms in which inner vision could be privileged over physical vision are examined. This leads me to address questions raised by the relationship between science and the domain of the visible, questions which are continued in the third and fourth chapters. First, the relationship between matter and mind interrogated by George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* (1859) is considered and linked back to George Lewes's views on the role of the imagination in art and science. What may be seen to be at stake is the relationship between empirical, quantifiable data, and 'the mind's eye'. From this, I move to examine the ways in which scientists used metaphor in order to make invisible forces – in this case, the imperceptible movement of the glacier – visible to the imagination of the non-scientific reader.

The functioning of the metaphor to explain the operations of the invisible was necessarily crucial to the figuration and

popularisation of many further developments in Victorian science, particularly those concerning molecular laws, the workings of electricity, magnetism and wave theory. The invisible means of transmission which enabled the new technologies of communication – the telegraph and the telephone in particular – further served to collapse the boundaries between the material and immaterial modes of circulation about which Carlyle had been able to write with such confidence.¹⁰¹

Yet it is impossible to ignore the fact that for many Victorians, that which was not visible did not so much inspire as frighten. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the city, where both the metaphoric and the mephitic threatened eruption, whether in the form of class unrest or of foetid sewage arrangements. The invisibility of metropolitan life at various levels – something which went hand in hand with the continuing and rapid transformation of the architectural and social spaces of its surfaces – was, I argue, linked with concern about the relationship of the present to history, and the desire to find continuity by exploring the locations of the memory. In this context, I consider the Victorian fascination with what lay under London, the arteries of the city's body. Making these channels visible was not just a matter of scrutinizing the metropolis's healthy or putrid workings, but was a means of writing historical depth onto the site of the modern, just as examining the memory could help ground an individual's sense of identity. It was a means, moreover, of giving stability not just to changing topography but to the onrush of visual impressions that urban life brought with it: what Georg Simmel was to characterise as 'the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of changing impressions'.¹⁰²

In the following two chapters, I return to the surface – this time, to the painted surface, and to the language of art criticism during the period. In other words, from looking at both generalised and metaphoric concern with the act of seeing, I consider its employment in a specific cultural field, and the implications of the fact that, as Norman Bryson has put it, 'It is in the interaction of painting with social formation that the semantics of painting is to be

found, as a variable term fluctuating according to the fluctuations of discourse.¹⁰³ What becomes instantly apparent is that notwithstanding the problematisation of the visual that I have outlined, the act of looking at a painting is rarely discussed as though the operation of the eye, and the assimilation and comprehension of the sensations it receives, causes any difficulties whatsoever, or prompts any debate. Why should this be the case? Why the slippage between an intellectual interrogation of the act of seeing, and a bland acceptance, by many of those whose job was seeing and the interpretation of the visual, of the apparent ease of the act in which they were engaged?

I begin by enquiring into the role of the art critic during this period, showing how variegated agendas were at stake for them other than educating the public to look at and to form standards of judgement about what they saw – however important they also believed these factors to be. This necessitates examining the relationship between art and language both as it was discussed, and as it was tacitly present, in the work of critics of contemporary painting. Simultaneously, it involves acknowledging the commodity function, as opposed to, or in excess of, the aesthetic function of painting within the Victorian period, whether this commodification is related to the status of art in market terms, or, more broadly, as an element within the circulation of cultural capital.¹⁰⁴ The assumption that one could write about paintings in the same way that one criticised and commented on novels, which is strongly present in the narrativising drive in both art and art criticism, led to the development of a critical vocabulary that rested heavily on ethical and social assumptions.¹⁰⁵ Much populist art criticism privileged paintings where the meaning seems to lie in its narrative content and the concomitant decoding of proffered visual detail – in the ‘prose’ rather than the ‘poetry’ of painting, to use a frequently reiterated distinction. This provoked scorn in those who believed that both art, and those who wrote about art, had more valuable tasks to perform, but its dominance as a mode of writing about art indicates the ways in which paintings were so frequently ‘read’, not so much according to the terms of their innate, formalist attributes, but in relation to a wider social agenda structured

according to a range of dominant narratives. This is demonstrated in relation to the contemporary reception of some specific works, centring around those which take gambling as their central theme: Robert Martineau's *The Last Day in the Old Home* (1860), Alfred Elmore's *On the Brink* (1865) and William Powell Frith's series, *The Road to Ruin* (1878) and *The Race for Wealth* (1880), which play both on a spectator's ability to construct a coherent narrative from the encoded visual evidence placed before them, and on his or her wider familiarity with narratives of gambling.

Not all paintings, however, were as easy to read, and carried such a clear didactic message, as these works. In the criticism that seeks to elucidate subject painting, what emerges is that the act of looking is frequently subordinated to an enforcement of dominant social opinions that bear little relation to the self-conscious employment of the eye. Yet the direction taken by art criticism shifted along with the paintings it addressed, and the prevalence of narrativising, moralising criticism became, by the later 1870s, less apparent even within writing aimed at a non-specialist public. In the next chapter, James Sully's essay on 'The Undefinable in Art' (1878)¹⁰⁶ is drawn on as a way into considering both the painting of Whistler and that of English Symbolist artists, including Burne Jones, whose *Mirror of Venus* (1876) is a focal point for Sully's argument. I discuss the ways in which the language of surface and depth comes to feature in later nineteenth-century aesthetic writing, often in conjunction not just with painterly technique, but with the operations of the perceiver's 'dim regions of the sub-conscious'.¹⁰⁷ This involves placing Sully's work on perception in the wider context of the relationship between science and art in the latter half of the nineteenth century, thus returning to the question of what happens in the perceiving mind, behind the gaze, and showing how the developing science of psychology is enlisted in the understanding of the operations of perception. George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and its relationship to G. H. Lewes's final work, *Problems of Life and Mind* – its final two volumes completed and made ready for publication by Eliot – allow one to see these factors intersecting within imaginative writing.

In the penultimate chapter, I return briefly to narrative art, albeit that which took a much more open-ended form, when I consider two ‘problem pictures’: Frank Dicksee’s *A Reverie* (1894), and Millais’s *Speak! Speak!* (1895). These particular paintings, showing spectral female figures appearing to men, may fashionably allude to ‘a spiritual realm above or beneath the material one’.¹⁰⁸ They also may be related to a further important borderland between the seen and the unseen: the issue of hallucination, and what this phenomenon may be made to say about the act of seeing. The relationship of science and literature in respect to this issue is explored through the rhetoric of ghost stories, and by considering a couple of H. G. Wells’s tales which seek to find allegorical form for abstract mathematical concepts.

The angle of vision, the point of perception, whether actual or metaphorical, is never fixed and final. It is with this in mind that my conclusion draws on the concept of the horizon, both as it figured within Victorian writing and painting, and, more particularly, as it has been taken up in a phenomenological sense by thinkers this century. The idea that there may always be another way, or set of ways, of looking at an object; that there may be more to it than ‘meets the eye’; that a different subjectivity will ensure that it is seen and interpreted in a different way; that new techniques of viewing will enable a different conceptualisation of the object – all these notions serve to destabilise confidence in the equilibrium of the visual world. It is my aim, in what follows, to show the Victorians’ increasing awareness of the instability of the visual, and their problematisation of what they saw. The issue of visuality, in the Victorian period, has as shifting a focus as the curious, inquisitive, roving eye itself.

James Sully remarked in 1876 that:

There is probably no region of phenomena which has received less illumination from the activities of the modern scientific spirit than the processes of the Fine Arts. This fact is unmistakably betrayed in the associations which still cling to the term *aesthetic*.

To speak of an aesthetic inquiry is to the ordinary mind to refer to the densest stratum of nebulous thought. To call a subject aesthetic is to claim its exemption from a clear and searching investigation.¹⁰⁹

But he counters this point of view. In addition to reminding his readers of the number of great artists who have themselves taken part in the discussion of scientific problems, he advances the importance of what he terms 'the psychological method' when it comes to dealing scientifically with aesthetic issues. This would involve 'an appeal not only to the study of mental operations by individual self-reflection but also to the newer inquiries [he doubtless had Herbert Spencer particularly in mind] into the laws of mental development in the race, and of the reciprocal actions of many minds in the social organism.'¹¹⁰ Even by the end of the nineteenth century, however, the fact that art and science might be seen as inter-related was far from securely established, and a counter-movement – a desire to separate visual art and science and to assert the autonomy of each – must be recognised. Mary Costelloe commented that 'Art is so much an "extra" in the lives of most people that they can hardly bring themselves to think of it seriously, and the idea of using the two words "art" and "science" in connection seems like a mere paradox.'¹¹¹ Yet she, like many others, was committed to breaking down this apparent paradox, and showing the intersections generated by paying attention to the complex processes involved in looking.

In 1879, the mathematician, essayist and popularising scientist William Kingdon Clifford published *Seeing and Thinking*. In this, he claims that the topic of seeing:

is a sort of Clapham Junction of all the sciences in regard of the number of trains of thought which converge at this point, and which go out from it. In the first place we have a connection with physiology; in the next place we have a connection with physics . . .; and we have a connection with mechanics by means of the mechanical explanation of those actions which go on within us; and we have connection with a subject far more difficult than any of these, namely, the subject of consciousness – what it is that we

see, whether we see rightly, and how it is that we think. And also, it may be observed, as this is a sort of junction of all the lines of the sciences, that there are more trains of thought which go off the line just at this point than at any other.¹¹²

In what follows, I investigate the fact that seeing, for the Victorians, involved not just the scientific issues which branched off Clifford's railway junction, but intertwined scientific understanding with a whole matrix of cultural and social practices. For us, as for the Victorians, the topic of seeing is one which breaks down disciplinary divisions, and a commitment to the importance of bringing differing disciplines into dialogue with one another informs this work.